

Happy Birthday...from Page 1A

Pauline Neal (Jarrett) Harkins, who died in June.

He also noted that as long as he is breathing, the Good Lord still has a purpose for him to serve.

"I thank the Lord that he has left me behind for some particular reason," Ira Harkins said. "My wife, after 68 years of marriage passed away eight months ago. I was 9 years older than her and we planned that I would go first, but I just want to thank the Lord for having some reason to keep me around."

After he was drafted, Ira was taken from Atlanta to Virginia for basic training.

After completing boot camp, he was sent to Maryland where he stayed approximately 6 months before he was on the move again.

This time he was sent to Connecticut, where he spent close to four years in the New England area, while World War II raged in the European and Pacific Theaters.

"I was very fortunate that I didn't hear any weapons fired in anger until I got to Vietnam in 1965," Ira Harkins said.

Ira Harkins will never forget the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and when he heard about it, he had never heard of Pearl Harbor. However, he quickly realized that the events of Dec. 7, 1941 would forever change the world.

"I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was but I found out the next day that President (Franklin) Roosevelt made an announcement saying that 'we're at war,'" Ira Harkins said. "I remember thinking that a lot of men won't be com-



Left, it takes two cakes to celebrate Ira Harkins' birthdays now. Right, Ira Harkins and his long-time friend Bud Akins celebrate his 95th birthday last week. Photos/Lowell Nicholson

ing back, but I was going to make it. I imagine that every man thought the same thing, 'I will make it,' but some did not make it."

Ira Harkins served one tour of duty in southeast Asia during 1965 and 1966 before returning to civilian life in 1972.

Sgt. Major Harkins served 31 years, 4 months, and 19 days for Uncle Sam.

During his birthday celebration last week, Ira Harkins toured each room in the Historic Courthouse, where pictures of himself were common in the "military room."

He spent a few moments reminiscing, giving first hand accounts regarding

the rich history of the Blairsville-Union County community that his generation, better known as the "Greatest Generation," helped to shape during the trying times of the Great Depression and World War II.

When asked what is the most drastic change that he has seen in his 95 years of calling Union County home, he quickly responded.

Without hesitation his answer was the highway and road expansion in the rural mountain community.

"The biggest change that I have seen in Union County, particularly in Suches is paved roads," he said. "Until then, if it rained, most of

the time you would get stuck before you could even reach your destination. I remember thinking that gravel roads were a blessing but look at all the paved roads now."

More than 20 people attended the momentous occasion and celebration.

Gift...from Page 1A

dent Gary Steppe said.

The Board of Education voted unanimously to accept the gift last week at Union County BOE headquarters.

The monument, which will be erected outside Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium, will include the names of all players, managers and coaches, the school's principal in 1957, and the first Union County Quarterback Club members.

The 1957 Football Team members raised money for the lasting tribute to the 1957 team, and the Panther football program.

The 1957 Panthers also will purchase a life size bronze sculpture of a Panther to be placed outside the team's field house.

The monument and the panther sculpture are lasting legacies to the school's 57-year-old football program.

The team used donations to help offset the costs of the two projects.

They solicited businesses, individuals, and civic organizations to help pay for the almost \$10,000 in costs.

1957 Most Valuable Player Jim McAfee smiles when he thinks of that momentous first football season.

"We were undefeated, playing East Fannin, and we beat them," he said. "It didn't say that on the scoreboard, the final score was 18-14 East Fannin. Wendell Runion scored a touchdown, but the referees said he didn't cross the goal line. I believe he did, and everyone from Union County believed he did. The referees saw it differently."

McAfee, a lineman on that Panther squad, said the East Fannin game would always stand out in his mind.

"It was cold, raining, the field was solid mud," he said. "It was a hard-fought game that just stands out in my memory."

Bill Parker, the team's center in 1957, remembered the game as well.

"We played our hearts out," Parker said. "We didn't want to be beaten."

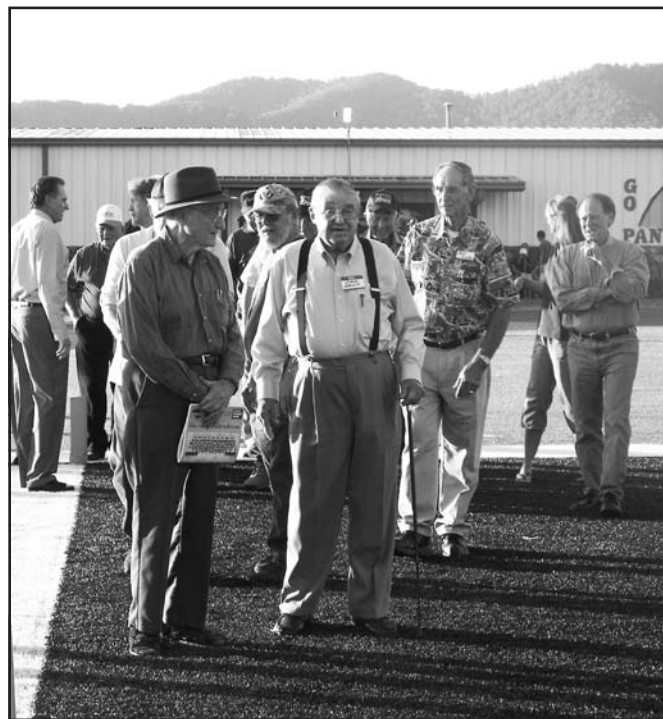
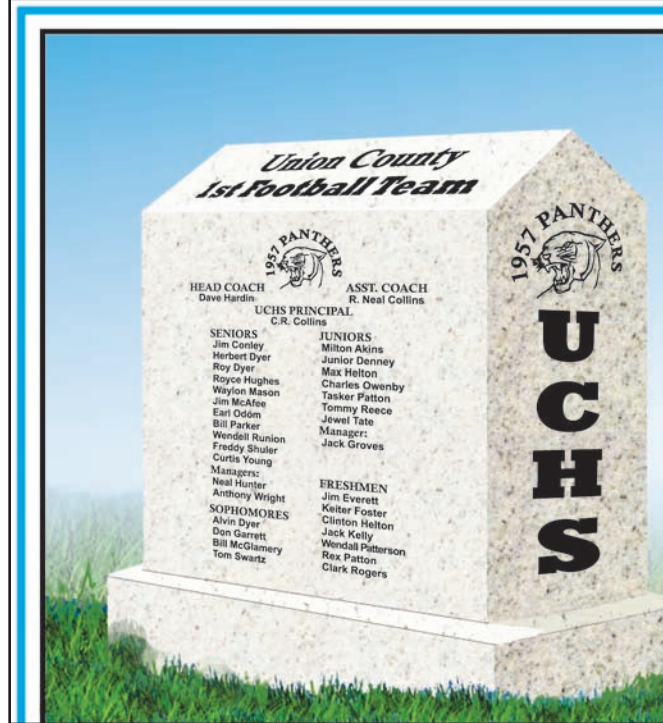
Under the leadership of Coach Dave Hardin and Assistant Coach R. Neal Collins, the Panthers shut out their first two opponents by a combined score of 51-0.

They faced Cleveland in the season's third game. They won that one by a score of 18-13.

It wasn't until the season's fourth game that a Panther football team ever lost a game. It was the dreaded, heartbreaking loss to East Fannin, 18-14.

The loss started a losing streak as the Panthers were downed by Madison County the following week 35-13.

"I believe I'd like to forget that game," McAfee said. "They had a 200-pound fullback that couldn't be stopped."



The 1957 Football Panthers have their place in UCHS history.

The loss to Madison County was the last game the Panthers would lose in 1957, as they shut out their final opponents by a combined score of 70-0.

McAfee, Max Helton, Roy Dyer and Charles Owenby became the first gridiron legends in Union County football history.

The other 22 Panthers

on that 1957 team went on to legendary status in later years. And, the rest as they say is history.

"You know, we had some folks that went on to serve as elected officials in Union County on that team," Parker said. "Earl Odom, Herbert Dyer, and Jim Conley were on that team."